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**Resurgence:
A Rebirth of Blackness in Austin**

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Resurgence: A Rebirth of Blackness of Austin

by

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Report

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandfather, Donald, for serving as a living example of what is possible, and proof that there are no limits except those we set for ourselves. Thank you for paving the way.

To my niece, Taylor Ayana Thompson: may you always be inspired to pursue your dreams without hesitation or regard for anyone who may doubt or question your God-given gifts. From the time you were born, I have seen in you a light, unlike anything I've witnessed before. Thank you for brightening my life. Know that you are capable of achieving your highest aspirations. I pray that you continue bringing light and joy to anyone and everyone you encounter.

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Last, but not least, thank you to my parents and Robert for your love and support, and for leading by example and teaching me the value of hard work and perseverance. This degree is as much your accomplishment as it is mine.

To the city of Austin: may we continue striving to be better.

Abstract

Resurgence: A Rebirth of Blackness in Austin

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This work spotlights the narrative of a group unofficially termed the “creators”. Consisting primarily of millennial, black transplants who, upon arriving to Austin— the city lauded as the progressive “blue island in the red sea”— found black culture and spaces to be lacking, they— as a result— began working to create their own.

I propose that these creators— artists, musicians, activists, poets, community leaders, corporate professionals and performers— have generated a new wave of black culture. Though there are many who fit this description, I’ve chosen a select few to focus on, at least for this initial project which contains three components: a video, photo series, and an essay, all hosted on a website. (Link: <https://karahenderson03.wixsite.com/resurgence>) The video serves to introduce the general plot of the story, as well as some of the major players. It will be pitched as the start of a full-length documentary to various digital platforms. Photographs fall under the category of either ‘portrait’ or ‘sense of place’. The written portion offers a deeper look at the prevailing issues plaguing the city’s black populous.

The contention between the remaining “ethnic enclave” of Austin’s historically, black East Side and younger generations is a subtle theme throughout the video. Though both groups’

missions are ultimately the same— to preserve and champion blackness and black culture in Austin— there have seldom been collaborations. Generational divides, and a shift in regard for traditional black home spaces (church, school systems) that historically served as gathering places within the community, are at least partially to blame.

Exacerbating these issues is the city's continual promotion and claims of non-existent diversity. Austin brings major black, urban artists to partake in festivals such as ACL or SXSW without seeming to offer fundamental support to its own minority, artist community.

This project attempts to highlight stories not often heard or given the platform they deserve, and more generally, display black folks simply *being* or *existing* in Austin.

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Austin's East Side has experienced a shift.

Once the epicenter of a thriving African-American culture, the East Side —home to the city's first historically black college, Huston-Tillotson University, and the city's Negro baseball league team —has suffered a long and steady decline. Over the past four decades, land developers, outside businesses, and newcomers seeking high-paying jobs in Austin's tech sector have taken over the area's prime real estate, coveted for its proximity to downtown. As a result, higher taxes and inflated costs of living have driven black residents from the neighborhood in an accelerating exodus.

An authoritative 2014 study by University of Texas at Austin professors, Eric Tang and Bisola Falola, found that between 2000 to 2010 Austin was the only fast-growing U.S. city experiencing double-digit population growth while simultaneously seeing an absolute decline in its African-American population.

Yet the future of black culture on Austin's East Side and beyond, doesn't appear entirely bleak, thanks to the influx of a group unofficially termed the "creators"— black millennial transplants from around the country who have come to Austin, enticed by the city's reputation as a progressive outpost in a relentlessly red-state—the proverbial "blue island in the red sea" of Texas. But, upon finding black culture and spaces lacking, they have set about establishing a foothold of their own in music, fashion, art, and business. In fact, a 2018 Brookings Institution study by William Frey found that from 2010 to 2015 Austin's black millennial population grew to 7.3 percent causing racial and ethnic minorities to make up more than half of the city's total millennial population.

Artists, professionals, performers, content creators and more, have joined the ranks of the "creators". Gradually, but undeniably, they are altering Austin's landscape by challenging the city's economic, political, and cultural infrastructure, which has historically excluded people of color. They are doing so by promoting and encouraging black unity and cultural awareness via communal spaces and social functions specifically for people of color. These events and places are determined, hosted and promoted by black-owned businesses, non-profits, creative collectives, and their allies. Their slogan? Designed for us, by us.

Despite making headway, the adjustment for these creators hasn't been easy. Those seeking to put down roots in Austin face challenges, including subtle racism and a general lack of spaces and venues that cater to black audiences. Each of these factors serves as a daily reminder that for a place that values weirdness, one has to be "the right kind of weird" to feel welcome.

"Space plays a role," said Evelyn Ngugi, a comedian and digital storyteller more commonly known by her YouTube and online alias, Evelyn from the Internets. "That's why it's so hard to pinpoint black culture in Austin because physical spaces are disappearing more and more. When I think of Dallas or Houston, I can think of people who own restaurants or own space and take up space. In Austin, it's not evident. We don't know where we're going to live, let alone have businesses with bricks and mortar."

Though dealing with obvious challenges, many members of the creator collective are aware of the change they're helping to enact. "There is a new wave of black culture," said Adrian Armstrong, a multimedia artist who recently completed a six-week artist residency at Austin's Line Hotel through Big Medium, a non-profit organization dedicated to championing artists and the contemporary arts in Austin and across Texas. "There has been an influx of younger people of color, and we're all on the same grind and have the same goals."

In 2014 Armstrong came to town from Omaha, a city he describes as "culturally and racially segregated." Still, he was surprised by Austin's lack of diversity. As previously mentioned, 7.3 percent of the city's population is now made up of black individuals, while Omaha's black population makes up 12.1 percent. To help fill the void, Armstrong co-created with Akili Humphrey, Brown State of Mind, a brand and creative agency for creatives of color.

Brown State of Mind (BSoM) aids artists by curating showcases and events for them to either perform or display artwork. BSoM secures the venue space and handles all marketing and advertising on behalf of all artists involved. Given that the self-proclaimed "live music capital of the world's" venues indulge lovers of blues, alternative rock, and country music, it's not always easy for urban artists to find performance opportunities like those offered by BSoM.

Ngugi came to Austin from the Dallas/Fort Worth area in 2014 to be a little fish in a big pond at the University of Texas at Austin. "Growing up where I grew up ... it didn't feel like boogie

suburbs, desperate housewives," she said. "It felt very small, so I wanted to be one of the people who managed to leave."

With UT-Austin boasting over 40,000 students, Ngugi believed it would serve as "the perfect place to get lost and discover who I am." Like Armstrong, she would quickly learn things were not as they seemed.

"Austin has some of the best marketing in the country because when you think Austin you think very, specific things and then when you come here, it's not that—or that's not the full picture. I didn't know there was a significant [historic] black population here because it's not at the forefront of what Austin says about itself."

In 2016, Ngugi, along with college friend Doyin Oyeniyi, created "Austin While Black," a docuseries and platform for individuals to speak about their experiences of being black in Austin. The project secured interviews with then city councilwoman, Ora Houston, and various artists. One early segment highlighted how many artisans were forced out of their Highland Mall studio spaces when the property was purchased and transformed into what is now Austin Community College.

"We never liked the phrase 'giving a voice to the voiceless' because no one is voiceless, people just aren't listening to them," said Oyeniyi, who is currently a journalist for Texas Monthly, a monthly American magazine headquartered in Downtown Austin. "There were, are, and will be black people talking about what's happening. That hasn't been incorporated in the larger Austin narrative. We wanted to do our small part in elevating [black] voices."

While Ngugi and Oyeniyi have worked to challenge the current narrative via digital storytelling, another pair of Austin creators have sought to make a change within the political sector.

"We felt there was an unmet need," explained Kristina Brown of Counter Balance: ATX, an advocacy group for women and minorities. She seeks to provide a counter-effect to a "system that traditionally disenfranchises people of color and poor people."

According to the organization's official website, Counter Balance: ATX is an L4 organization within the 400+1 federation, the world's first Black cooperative federation and identifies as a self-

care organization that seeks to combat systems, not people through alternative research methods and self-care programming that influence current policy initiatives within the justice system.

Brown arrived in Austin in 2016 from Arizona to pursue a master's in epidemiology at UT-Austin with a concentration in health disparities. Her research focuses on the African-American community and the implications of "psychological factors like discrimination and perception." Because of this, Brown found the Austin Justice Coalition (AJC)— an organization that advocates for economic and racial equity for people of color in Austin— to be the perfect vehicle to acclimate her to Austin's activist scene. In her time at AJC, Brown met Fatima Mann, with whom she co-founded Counter Balance: ATX.

Remembering a quote from civil rights icon and human rights advocate, Ella Baker, Brown said, "Strong people do not need strong leaders. I want people to be strong enough, healthy enough— simply enough to advocate on their behalf and no longer need us. So they can save themselves."

In addition to facing systemic racism and other disparities, Austin's new creators often battle feelings of isolation. Aimee Everett, a painter, and New Orleans native, moved to Austin in January 2015. Even after living in Austin for an extended period, she said she still feels: "as though I'm not an Austin resident yet, as though I'm still visiting."

While Everett hasn't encountered blatant discrimination, she said she sees subtle forms of oppression including "the way that Austin sets up its clubs" — alluding to strict dress codes that assault black culture by excluding "hats, jeans, tennis shoes" and specific music that is played.

Maryland native Michael J. Love agrees, but unlike Everett, he has witnessed blatant displays of racial insensitivity. An interdisciplinary tap-dance artist and MFA candidate in the Performances Public Practice Program at the University of Texas at Austin, he said; "Dance in Austin is very white—white straight women making pieces about modern dance. It's not diverse."

Wanting to experience a change in pace and scenery, Love relocated to Austin in 2014 from New York City when Austin-based Tapestry Dance Company & Academy offered him the positions of principal dancer and soloist. Before arriving, Love said he'd heard "it was a fun, quirky, hip space. I knew it would be mostly white by how it was described to me, and because it's a city in Texas." Even so, what occurred a season and a half into his tenure at Tapestry shocked him.

During a program entitled “53,” Tapestry’s director, a white woman, donned blackface during a rehearsal. “She was shooting promo shots,” Love recalled, “and thought it was a good idea to paint half her face in oil-based black paint.” Beyond personal discomfort, Love found this behavior disrespectful of tap as a craft and to its history.

“It wasn't a safe place to be a black, queer artist,” Love said, so he left in 2016, “in the interest of taking care of myself and doing work I felt good doing. Tap dance is an Africanist art form. It has roots in blackness, specifically American blackness,” said Love. “It's a form that's indigenous to the people that came here or were purchased and brought here during the Middle Passage. I learned some [Tapestry] board members didn't know what blackface was. That's the history you need to understand if this is your career if these are the forms you're using. None of those things were understood or engaged with at a critical level.”

In spite of the obstacles they typically encounter, Austin’s African-American creators continue trekking forward, understanding that the work they do now is for those who will follow, black people and allies alike.

"There's a lot of people in Austin who understand that the arts aren't as diverse as they should be. There's a general and genuine interest for people who are different and making good work,” said Love. “The impetus for the interest is something to be interrogated, but it is here.”

The lesson to be taken from each of these creators? If you do not see the things you want or need, don’t wait for others to provide them; work to fill the void for yourself and others. Transplant or native, members of Austin's black community have the opportunity to stand together, build upon, and ride this new wave of culture together.

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